

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

People and Books: Connecting the Dots

Chiwan Choi · Wednesday, May 14th, 2014

It's sometimes difficult to understand what a book is, especially (strangely enough) once you've experience life as a publisher. I often joke about how the least interesting part of running a press is the book.

We get lost in a life where the book is mere merchandise, a product we're supposed to be slinging for the benefit of the author and for our own bottom line.

But then you are enjoying a cold beer on a day and week that is starting to heat up much too fast and you come across a couple of articles that help you see things a little clearer.

And I think: *Aha! Books are like dots on a global canvas that we connect, one by one, until everything and everyone and everything are interconnected and communicating with each other.*

Both articles were written by the great LA author, [Hector Tobar](#). And both were published in the LA Times. On consecutive days. The first was about [Seite Books](#), a small bookstore in East LA that partnered with us for the Grand Park Downtown BookFest and the LA Times Festival of Books. The second article was about the internationally renowned Portuguese author José Luis Peixoto, whose book *Antidote* is the most recent title that Writ Large Press published, and his journey into North Korea.

SEITE BOOKS

Seite Books is Adam Bernales and Denice Diaz. And the details of their childhoods. And the individual journeys, from street to neighborhood to country to corner. It is the influence of the weight of their individual histories. [All gathered in books:](#)

Diaz, the daughter of Mexican immigrants, grew up across the street, on Cesar Chavez Boulevard. A set of bound classics salvaged from a neighbor's trash was the beginning of her childhood book collection. "There was Freud, Dostoevsky, Darwin," she said. "I was bored and I picked them up and started reading them."

But building a personal collection required bus trips out of book-starved East Los Angeles. "I'd save my allowance and go out and buy books."

Bernales is from Chicago, the son of a Peruvian immigrant father and a U.S.-born

mother who is a middle-school English teacher. As a boy he helped his mother set up a small lending library for her students, pasting sleeves for check-out cards into books.

As young adults, Bernales and Diaz studied art. When Bernales visited Los Angeles, a mutual friend brought them together. Like many bookish couples, they liked to go on dates to bookstores — but that meant traveling far from East L.A., to place like Vroman's in Pasadena or the Little Old Bookshop in Whittier. (Libros Schmibros, the Eastside's other bookstore and lending library, hadn't opened yet).

The books Seite carries make me giddy. I remember picking up a little zine that was in Spanish...with English subtitles. Stuff like that, books from somewhere in the world that if it wasn't for people like Adam and Denice, I would have never come across in my life. And it seems to be that exact sentiment from Seite's neighbors that is allowing the store to thrive.

JOSÉ LUIS PEIXOTO

While Judeth and I were working on the design of *Antidote*, commissioning LA-based artist [Michael Manning](#) to create a series of original work for the book, José told us he was about to take a trip to North Korea. He asked me a few questions about my family, about my parents and how they were born in the North and fled to the South when they were kids.

It seemed like only few months passed and José had not only taken his trip and returned home, but had finished the a book about it and it had already gotten published (how does publishing work so fast in Portugal???).



The book has been serialized on [Ninth Letter](#) and Hector Tobar [gives it some notice](#), especially Peixoto's description of the books available in Pyongyang:

"I bought a copy of everything they had," Peixoto writes. His purchases included "an anthology of folk tales called 'The Legends of Pyongyang' translated into French; a long epic poem in English called 'Mount Paektu'; a novel entitled 'Sea of Blood,' adapted from the famous revolutionary opera." Said opera is credited to Kim Il Sung, while the adaptation was written by the ChoSeon Novelist Association of the 4.15 Culture Creation Group.

Peixoto also found "a novella set in wartime called 'The People of the Fighting Village,' written by the director of the prose sub-committee of the Central Committee of the Korean Writers' Union; and 'A Usual Morning,' a collection of short stories by various authors, the first of which (the title piece of the collection) narrates how the Great Leader, personally, resolves the problems of an agricultural cooperative and rewards the efforts of a young comrade."

Sunyoung of Kaya Press and I stopped by briefly at Seite to talk about bringing in authors to do an

event in the alley or at the bus stop across the alley.

And I started thinking.

It's the details of our childhood. Of that little part of the big vast world in which we started. And the journey that follows. The faces. The language. Of our neighborhoods. Our corners. The language of our parents and the language of our kids. Of the curiosity that sets in. The details of our desperation. To know. To feel. To not be alone. For someone to share the things we have not known. A word. Some detail. What made a person laugh one day under the sun on the other side of the world.

And the books. The dots. They connect us. They send us and bring us. In search of a place and a person who can give us this thing, even if they have to write it.

Like a Portuguese author who meets a broke couple in LA that wants to publish books. How he travels to a land not many of us get to see. Then writes. Then publishes. Connecting us. Sending us into another journey.

To a corner in East LA. To a bookstore inside a mother's shop that sells clothes and chips and perfumes. To a young couple with separate histories. To the drive to create and recreate. For themselves and for the people who walk past their window on Rowan.

How they bring these dots, these books, that have originated from all around the world. From the past. From a past even further back than that. From the present. In languages we have not known. But translated by more strangers who also wanted to connect the dots.

How we keep searching and finding and creating more and more of these things that can make us whole, by bonding us from DTLA to Pyongyang to Lisbon to East LA to North Carolina and New York to Germany to Peru to everywhere and everyone that we have to find, to meet, to know, to embrace.

*Top image by Michael Manning, original artwork for **Antidote**.*

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